



Opal

Orlan Orphans, Book 3

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KIRSTEN
OSBOURNE

Opal

Book Three in Orlan Orphans

By Kirsten Osbourne

Copyright 2015 Kirsten Osbourne

Kindle Edition, License Notes

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return to Amazon.com and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

Opal's life had gotten much better since she'd left New York. Her twin had just married, and she was living in a house with thirteen other girls, with a crazy old lady as their new "mother." Florence Reid, a little girl Opal met in town, was just what Opal needed to stop worrying about being left behind and move on with her life. The little girl needed help, and Opal was just the woman for the job!

Nathaniel Reid was a widower, doing what he could to keep his daughter happy and healthy. When he got in from a long day of work and found a woman there, cleaning his house and cooking his supper, he knew he needed to keep her around. Would he be able to convince her that she belonged in his life? Or would she go home and forget all about them?

To sign up for Kirsten Osbourne's mailing list and receive notice of new titles as they are available, click [here](#).

Chapter One

Opal walked down the main street of Nowhere, Texas, feeling more than a little lonely. Her twin sister, Ruby, had married recently, and the two had never spent a night apart. Now they seemed to never have time for each other. She hadn't thought she was particularly close to her sister before her marriage, and now she found she'd relied on her a great deal more than she realized.

She walked into the mercantile, not needing anything but to see her sister who was married to the owner of the store, Lewis Darcy. Ruby was at the counter in the front, and there was a short line in front of her. Opal grabbed something from the shelf, not even paying attention to what it was. She would feel stupid standing in line just to talk to her sister, so she'd buy something—anything.

Ruby looked as pretty as she always had. They weren't identical twin sisters, and Opal had always felt as if she was lacking when they'd stood side by side. Sure, she was blonde, and being blonde was more fashionable than dark hair, but Opal knew that Ruby had a quality about her that attracted men like flies to honey.

The line moved a little, and Opal's attention was drawn to the little girl in front of her. She stood on tiptoe, so she could see over the counter. "I need to buy five roses, please."

Ruby smiled sweetly at the child. "I'm sorry. We don't sell roses here."

"But it's my mama's birthday, and she needs flowers. I want to give her five, because I'm five years old." The child had red hair and a sweet smile.

"I still don't have any. Could you pick flowers for your mama for her birthday?" Ruby suggested.

The little girl's head dropped. "I don't know where any flowers are. Are you sure you don't have any?"

Opal felt her heart go out to the girl. "I know where some really pretty bluebonnets are, just up the road from here. I'll take you to pick them!"

Ruby met her sister's eyes and mouthed the words, "Thank you!"

Opal nodded, taking the girl's hand and putting the jar of preserves onto the counter. "I'll be back. Tomorrow, probably." She didn't have much time after she left work at Dr. Iris Harvey's house before the store closed. She had just hoped she could spend one minute chatting with her sister.

It was odd that she could feel lonely living with thirteen other girls, but she missed her sister more than she'd ever dreamed she

could. She, Ruby, and thirteen other orphans who had grown up with them in New York, had all been adopted by an eccentric old lady and her husband. Opal loved Edna Petunia and Cletus Sanders, but sometimes she really missed the wisdom of Mrs. Cassie Hayes, who had been the matron who'd raised them.

She looked down at the little girl beside her. "Does your mama like bluebonnets?"

The girl shrugged. "She never told me. I know she liked roses best, but I think she'll be happy with anything."

"What's your name?" Opal asked.

"Florence Reid. My mama calls me Flo."

"Flo. I like that. May I call you Flo?" Opal asked, as they walked toward the field of bluebonnets she'd seen on her way to the mercantile after work.

"Yes, ma'am. What can I call you?"

"Just call me Opal. The girl who works in the mercantile? She's my twin sister, Ruby."

"I like those names." Flo gasped when she saw the field filled with bluebonnets. "Oh they're beautiful! Mama will love these!" She hurried to the field and quickly picked five of the prettiest blooms.

Opal smiled as she watched the child, happy to help her pick the flowers for her mother. She picked a few as well, knowing they would make a beautiful centerpiece on the table at the Sanders' house.

"Are you picking flowers for your mama, too?" Flo asked.

Opal frowned. "Sort of. My real mama died when I was just a little girl, but I was adopted by a very sweet old lady. I'm taking the flowers to her, because they'll make her very happy."

"What does adopted mean?"

"It means that someone wanted me to be their child, and they filed papers with the state saying they'd take care of me until I was grown."

Flo smiled. "Oh that's nice. They did that because your mama died?"

"Well, both my mama *and* my papa died. I was an orphan."

"That's sad. I'm glad you got adopted." Flo held up her five flowers. "I'm going to take these to my mama now. Do you want to come with me and meet her?"

Opal grinned, nodding. She loved children, which was why she worked for Dr. Harvey taking care of her three step-daughters. "I would love to meet your mama."

"She only talks to me, but she'll be happy to meet you." Flo walked along, happily chattering about the pretty flowers. "Mama loves everyone."

"She sounds like a wonderful lady."

"Oh, she is. And she has the prettiest smile in the whole world. People say I look just like her."

"She must have the prettiest smile in the world if she has the same smile as you. Yours is beautiful!" Opal told the girl.

When Flo turned into the town cemetery, Opal was certain she was just taking a shortcut through on her way home. When the little girl stopped at a small cross in one corner of the property under a tree, Opal felt her heart break just a little.

"Here she is! Mama, I brought a new friend. She showed me where to pick five flowers for you. I brought you five because that's how old I am now. I was only four when I got to hug you last, but I still think about you every day." Flo carefully placed the flowers in front of the headstone. "My new friend's name is Opal, and I'm so glad she came with me."

Flo knelt at her mother's grave, carefully pulling some weeds that had cropped up. "She picked some flowers for her 'adopted mama,' and I think they're just beautiful. I felt so bad for her, because she lost both parents. That has to be lots worse than just losing one." Flo smiled up at Opal.

With tears streaming down her cheeks, Opal stood watching the child. She wanted to gather her up in her arms and keep her forever, but she knew that wasn't the right thing to do. Why the girl still had a father, who she was sure took good care of her.

When the girl stood up again, Opal eyed her a little more closely. Her dress was a bit too short, and there were some patches on it. Maybe her father needed some help.

"Who takes care of you now that your mama is gone?"

The girl shrugged. "Mostly Papa." She looked down at her dress. "He doesn't understand dresses, though. Or cleaning. Or food."

"Most men don't," Opal said with a smile. "Do you want me to walk to your house with you?"

"Oh, would you?" Flo asked, her face excited. "I hate walking by myself."

Opal wondered why she hadn't yet met this little girl and her father at church. She held her hand down for her. "You lead the way!"

Flo took the proffered hand happily. "We live this way." She started walking in the direction Opal would have walked to get home. "Papa raises cows."

"He does? Is he a farmer or a rancher?"

"Which one raises cows?" Flo asked, her nose scrunched up in thought.

"Both. Does your papa sell the milk from the cows or does he sell the cows for meat."

"Oh! He sells the cows for meat. There's a man he sold a bunch of cows to just before Mama died."

"I see. He's a rancher then. A farmer would milk the cows and then sell all the milk." Opal couldn't believe how much she was enjoying the company of Flo. Usually when she got off work, she even avoided the younger girls who were living in the Sanders' house, because she was so tired of constantly being around children.

Flo raised her arm, pointing toward a small house just outside of town. It was little bigger than a cabin. "I live there with my papa."

Opal nodded, looking around her. "Is your papa around?"

Flo shook her head. "No, he's not. He won't be home until after dark. He has to work all day, so I keep the house clean."

Opal closed her eyes, feeling bad for the girl. "Did you finish your chores for the day? Do you want me to help you?" She was surprised to hear the words come out of her mouth. She was already bone-weary from working all day, but she couldn't bear the thought of this little girl trying to do the work of a grown woman.

"That would be nice!" Flo sighed. "I hate doing all the cleaning, and Papa thinks I should know how to cook, but I'm only five, and Mama never had time to show me how."

"I'll show you." Opal went into the small house, noting there was a kitchen with a large table, a loft where she assumed Flo slept, and a door that led off the small area. So different than the way she lived with the Sanders. She rolled her sleeves up, and used the pump in the kitchen to fill a pot, which she immediately set on the stove.

While she waited for the water to boil, she took a rag and wiped off the table. There were dishes in the sink, and she'd tackle those as soon as the water had boiled. "What is there to cook?" Opal asked. She could make a good meal for the family before she went home to her own. She just hoped no one worried about her. They'd probably assume, correctly, that she'd gone to see Ruby, so it should be fine.

Flo opened a cabinet, and Opal looked at the meager offering of food. She took some salt pork, some potatoes and a few carrots. Once the pot was empty, she'd fry up the salt pork, and make a nice stew.

Flo stood beside Opal, looking up at her with gratitude in her eyes. "How can I help?"

Opal frowned. "Have you made the beds today? You can start with that, and then sweep the floors. By then I'll be ready to teach you to cook."

"Yes, ma'am." Flo rushed off to make the beds while Opal tackled the pile of dishes.

An hour later, the dishes were done, the floor swept, and the aroma from the stew was filling up the kitchen. "Do you know what time your papa finishes?" Opal asked. She knew there wasn't time to

bake any bread, but it would be nice if they had time to bake a cake for dessert. She felt certain the small family hadn't had a dessert since Flo's mama had died.

Flo looked out the window. "I don't know how to tell time, but the sun is still bright. He won't be home 'til after dark."

Opal nodded. "Then let's bake a cake for dessert. Would you like that?"

Flo nodded emphatically. "I would love that!"

Together, they gathered all the ingredients for a cake, and Opal helped Flo measure what was needed. She helped the little girl mix it, and they carefully poured the batter into a pan. "Is there cream? We could whip some cream for a frosting on the cake." She'd already checked, and they didn't have what she would need to make frosting.

"That sounds delicious!" Flo hurried out to the well, which was about twenty feet from the house, and pulled up a rope. On the end of it was a bottle of a white substance. "This is the cream!" She hurried back over to Opal and gave it to her.

Opal grinned. "This will be the best cake ever." She showed Flo how to make whipped cream, and helped her take the cake out of the oven as soon as it was done. The two of them set the table, and Opal dried her hands. "Now all you have to do is serve the stew and spread the whipped cream over the cake. Can you do that?"

Flo nodded, throwing her arms around Opal. "Thank you so much! We'll have a feast tonight!"

Some feast when we didn't even have time to bake bread. "I'll come back after I finish work tomorrow, and we'll bake some bread. You can't have a real feast without bread."

Flo smiled. "I'd like that. In the afternoon?"

"Yes, around the time I saw you in the store. I'll come straight here, and we'll get to work immediately."

She turned toward the door to leave just as it opened. Opal didn't particularly want to meet Flo's papa. In her mind, he was an ogre, forcing a tiny child to do a woman's work.

"Excuse me," she said, trying to walk past him.

His hand reached out and caught her forearm, effectively stopping her from leaving. "Who are you?"

She shrugged. "I live just up the road. I met Flo today, so I walked her home and ended up staying for a spell."

"Did you cook?" he asked, his face bewildered.

"Flo and I cooked together."

"It smells good. Thanks." He said nothing else and abruptly released her arm as he walked to the sink to wash his hands.

"Opal is my new friend," Flo told him. "She helped me pick flowers for Mama, and we took them to her."

The man looked back at Opal. "Thank you for your help. Would you care to stay and eat supper with us?"

"No, thank you, Mr.—" Opal stopped, realizing she didn't even know his name, and she'd been in his house for a couple of hours.

"Reid. Nathaniel Reid."

"Thank you, Mr. Reid. My family will be worried." Opal raised her hand to say goodbye to Flo. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Promise?" Flo asked, obviously excited to have someone with her for a while.

"I promise!"

While Opal walked home, she thought about the horrible thoughts she'd had about Flo's papa. After meeting him, she could see she'd been wrong. He wasn't a bad man, just one who needed help raising his daughter. When she thought of all the volunteers it had taken to keep the orphanage going, she knew she could be that help.

She'd go back every day if that's what it took. Flo had wormed her way into her heart quickly, but she had a feeling the girl was there to stay.

Chapter Two

Opal hurried into the house when she got home, and found the whole family sitting around the dining room table. Her spot was empty, but a table setting was there. "I'm sorry I'm late. I went to see Ruby, and then I met this little girl." She was shocked at how hungry she was. She took her spot and filled her plate with food prepared at a level that was unreachable for her. Between Edna Petunia and Sarah Jane, Opal couldn't think of a better cook.

"So you were with Ruby or the little girl you met?"

"The little girl. Her name is Flo, and I saw her in the mercantile, trying to buy flowers for her mama. I helped her pick flowers, and it turned out she was putting them on her mother's grave for her birthday." Opal quickly explained how the day had gone from there. The bluebonnets she'd picked for Edna Petunia were gracing the table at the Reids' house. "I'm sorry I didn't bring them home."

Edna Petunia smiled at her. "I'm just glad that you had the sense to leave them. Thank you for thinking of me, but they need them so much more than I do. I have so many pretty girls brightening up my house, I don't need flowers."

Opal smiled at the compliment. It was rare to get such sweet words from Edna Petunia. It wasn't that she didn't love the girls, she just seemed to think referring to them as "her bastards" was the only compliments they needed. No one was quite sure why Edna Petunia saw that as a compliment, but there was no doubt that she did.

"I'm going back to help again tomorrow. They don't even have any bread, and Flo was calling the pot of stew I cooked a feast." Opal shook her head. "It's hard to believe anyone would think of that as a feast."

Edna Petunia frowned. "I baked bread today, and I can do so again tomorrow. Take them a couple of loaves when you leave in the morning, and maybe a jar of the peach preserves I made."

"Thank you! I'll do that." Opal was pleased her family was so understanding about her being late, and so eager to help. They were all good people.

Penny looked at Opal. "Does she need new dresses? Should I come and help you?"

"I can sew a basic dress," Opal responded. "You have enough to do with school and keeping up with the sewing at the mercantile."

Penny nodded. "Just let me know if you do need help."

"Oh, I will," Opal said with a grin. "I'll be calling on all of you before I'm done."

Penny grinned. "I'm sure you will."

It was much later as Opal was climbing into bed, and she thought back over the happenings of the day. Now that Ruby had married, she had her own room, and it was odd. She was used to being able to talk things through with her sister, even after they were in bed.

Opal was happy to have met the girl. She'd worked more that day than she had in a very long time, but it was good. She was weary, but thrilled to have done something to actually help people. She couldn't wait to go back and give the little girl her second cooking lesson.

As soon as Dr. Iris was home from work, Opal grabbed her basket with the loaves of bread in it so she could take it to Flo and her father.

"You're sure in a hurry tonight, Opal. Is something wrong?"

Opal shook her head, mentioning that she was taking bread to the Reid family. "I met little Flo last night, and I want to help them as much as I can."

Iris smiled. "They're nice people. Flo's mother died in October, and I worry about how they're making it. I'm glad they have you to help them."

"I don't know what it is about Flo, but she just pulls on my heart strings. I want to take her home with me and keep her forever."

"Be careful. That's how I ended up married to Francis Harvey!"

Opal laughed. "I'm not at all worried about Mr. Reid. He didn't take notice of me. I'll see you Monday!" she called. Thankfully Dr. Iris only worked five days per week, so she had the whole weekend to herself. Why, she was certain she could sew a new dress for Flo in that time.

She walked quickly to the house on the edge of town. When she knocked on the door, Flo opened it with a squeal, throwing her arms around Opal. "You came back!"

"I told you I would!" Opal hugged the little girl, and then walked over to set the bread on the table. "If we hurry, we can get your laundry on the line before we need to start supper."

"Oh, that would be lovely! I'll get it!" Flo rushed from the room.

Opal smiled as she set the huge pot onto boil again. The dishes were done, which surprised her, but she still needed to boil water for the laundry.

Flo came back into the room dragging a laundry basket that was

heaped high. It looked like she'd stripped the beds as well as just bringing clothes. No matter. They had a few hours before sunset. Plenty of time to get it all done.

Opal helped her get the laundry washed, and then they put it all on the line. She felt odd handling the clothing a man she barely knew had worn, but she did it. She wanted to get as much done as she could before she had to head home.

"Okay, now let's go and fix supper," Opal said. "Do you have anything you're hungry for?"

"Papa bought a chicken in town today, and he said we could make chicken pie if you don't mind."

Opal had never made anything as fancy as chicken pie, but she'd made pies before, so she was certain she could figure it out. She mixed up the dough and looked up to a knock on the door.

Flo rushed to get it. "I came to help Opal for a little bit, if you don't mind," Sarah Jane announced.

Opal had always been slightly put off by Sarah Jane and her constant need to inflict her overly strict Christian views on others. She'd said some bad things about Ruby behind her back, because Ruby had kissed a man she wasn't married to. The good thing about Sarah Jane, though, was that she truly believed in Christian charity. She was there to help.

"Glad to see you, Sarah Jane," Opal said honestly. "My little friend here wants a chicken pie for supper, and I've never made one."

Sarah Jane pulled an apron from the pocket of her coat and pulled it over her head. The girl was always prepared for anything. "I'm happy to help. The hard part in making chicken pie is keeping the chicken moist." As she showed both Opal and Flo how to make the pie, she kept up a running commentary on the best way to do things. She set it on the work table when it was ready. "That needs to go into the oven about an hour before you want to eat."

"Thank you, Sarah Jane. I really appreciate it!" Opal realized she hadn't yet introduced the two. "Sarah Jane, this is my friend, Flo Reid. Flo, this is one of my friends who I grew up with, Sarah Jane."

Flo smiled at Sarah Jane. "It's nice to meet you. Thank you for helping us cook."

Sarah Jane grinned. "It's no problem at all." She looked at Opal. "Do they need butter? I can help you churn some butter if you have other things you need to do."

"Do you need butter?" Opal asked. She never would have thought of butter to go with the bread. Not until she was eating anyway.

Flo nodded. "We haven't had any in a long time. I'll get the butter churn!" She half carried and half dragged the churn into the

house from where it had been out front. "I think we need to wash it."

Sarah Jane took it from her. "I can take care of all that. You two do whatever else needs to be done."

Opal looked at Flo. "Do you know what else needs to be done?"

"Papa needs some of his clothes mended," Flo offered. She looked down at her worn dress that had been patched inexpertly too many times, and was much too short. "I probably need a new dress."

"We can handle both of those things," Opal said. She'd brought some of the money she'd made at her job and had been saving for gifts for people special to her. "Do you want to go to town and get some fabric for a new dress?"

Flo shook her head. "We don't need to. Mama had some she purchased right before she got sick. Let me get it!" She rushed off into her father's bedroom and brought out a wooden box filled with fabric, buttons and thread. There was a pair of scissors on top of everything. "This was Mama's sewing box." She held up a pretty blue fabric with flowers on it. "This was for a new Sunday dress for me."

"Well, then we'll make a new Sunday dress out of it." She went to the basket she'd brought, and pulled out a small pouch. She had a tape measure she had brought for just this purpose.

She made notes on a small piece of paper as she measured her, and then she took out the fabric. "I'll take the fabric home with me tonight and cut the dress out. Is that all right?"

"Oh, yes ma'am!" Flo was obviously having a hard time containing her excitement at the prospect.

"Now bring me your papa's mending, and I'll get started on that."

Sarah Jane finished churning the butter and put some in a large crock that Flo brought her. "I'm going to head home now, but I'll come and help when you need me." She hugged Flo tightly. "You're in good hands with Opal. She's smart."

Sarah Jane left to make the walk to the house and help Edna Petunia with supper. Flo sat beside Opal, and Opal showed her how to patch a pair of pants. Flo's papa's clothes were almost as bad as Flo's.

She put the pie into the oven when she gauged that the time was right, and then she sat back down to do some more mending. She would come earlier the next day so she could bake bread for them. She wished she had more time to help the small family.

All the clothes were off the line, and the beds were made up when Mr. Reid came into the house. "I just need to get the pie out of the oven, and I'll be on my way," she told him.

"Are you sure you won't eat with us tonight? You've worked so hard, it's the least we could do."

Opal bit her lip, thinking about it. Sarah Jane would surely tell

Edna Petunia that there was a lot of work to be done, so no one would worry about her if she stayed later. "All right. I can do that."

Flo jumped up and set another spot at the table, while Opal put the kettle on to warm the water for dishes. If she was staying for supper, she was going to help with the dishes.

Opal put a ball of butter onto the table, and one of the loaves of bread she'd brought from home beside it. Once they were all sitting, Opal cut the pie and served a piece to everyone.

Flo jabbered on about her day, thrilled to have her father home. They were obviously very close. "Opal's friend came and she helped us make the chicken pie, because Opal had never made one before."

"Your friend?" Mr. Reid asked her.

Opal nodded. "I grew up in an orphanage in New York, and they sent fifteen girls from our orphanage here. We were adopted by Cletus and Edna Petunia Sanders."

Mr. Reid nodded. "They're good people."

"They are. I still live with them, but I'm done with school now. I work for Dr. Iris Harvey. I'm a nanny and general housekeeper for them."

"I see. I appreciate you taking some time the last two days to help us catch up on our housework. And the meals have been superb. It's hard for us to figure out who should be doing the cooking, because neither of us know how to do much more than slice bread."

"I'm happy to help. Flo is delightful, and I'm enjoying our time together."

Mr. Reid eyed her all through the meal, as if he was thinking about something. After supper, he kept watching her as Opal and Flo did the dishes together.

When she was done, he got to his feet. "We'll walk you home."

"Oh, that's all right, Mr. Reid. It isn't far, and I feel perfectly safe."

He shook his head. "You shouldn't. There are too many cowboys around here for a beautiful young lady to feel safe." He took his hat from a hook by the door. "Come along, Flo. We're walking Opal home."

"Yes, Papa." Opal grabbed her shawl, and the three of them set out toward the Sanders' house.

Chapter Three

As they walked, Mr. Reid asked her questions about her life. "So why do you have enough time on your hands to do all this work for us? No beaux?"

Opal shook her head. "No. My twin sister married a short time ago, and I feel alone. So I've been at odds."

"You have a twin? Identical?"

"Actually no. We look very different. She's the pretty one."

He looked at her with surprise. If her sister was the pretty one, she must be one of the most beautiful women in the world. "Really? I find that hard to believe."

"Why? Am I so ugly I couldn't have a pretty sister?"

For just a moment, Nathaniel thought she was fishing for compliments, but then he realized she was serious. "You don't think you're pretty?"

She shrugged. "I don't think I make small children run away in fear, but I've never really been anything more than passable."

He blinked a few times. "I think you're one of the most beautiful women I've ever met."

Opal flushed. "Wait until you meet my sister. Then you'll understand."

"I'd like to meet her." His mind was whirling as they walked. He had an idea, and he didn't want to frighten her away, but he knew it was the best thing for him and his daughter. "If you're lonely, and you don't have a beau, and you like my daughter so much, why don't you marry me? I need a wife, and she needs a mother. I'm sure you've noticed that by now."

Flo stopped walking. She'd been running ahead, but when she heard her father's words, she stopped short, staring at Opal. "Oh yes, please. I would love to have you for a new mama! Please, Opal!"

Opal looked between the two as if they'd lost their minds. Didn't they know you were supposed to marry for love? "I—I barely know you."

"I realize that, and I'll give you some time to think about it. We'd love to have you complete our family, though. You're a special woman, and we need someone like you in our lives."

"I—I don't even know what to say to that, Mr. Reid."

"Once a man proposes marriage, you have to use his first name. It's Nathaniel."

"All right, Nathaniel. I still don't know what to say!"

Flo hurried to Opal's side, taking her hand in hers. "Say yes."

Oh, please say yes. You could teach me to clean and cook, and be my mama."

"I can do those things without being your mama," Opal told her. How she wished he would have asked when Flo wasn't there. It would have been so much easier to say no. He wasn't an unattractive man. Quite the contrary. He made her heart flutter when he looked at her. At first she'd thought it was because she was in his house, but no, she was attracted to him.

"You could do them better as her mother," Nathaniel countered. "Are you coming back over tomorrow?"

Opal nodded. "I am. I want to get you completely caught up on housework."

"Whatever your answer to my question is, I appreciate everything you've done."

When they reached the house, Flo gaped at it in shock. "You live there, Opal?"

Opal laughed. "I do. I live there with Sarah Jane and twelve other girls. And this crazy old lady. Do you want to meet them?"

"Oh, yes, please!"

Opal opened the front door, calling out, "We have company!"

Edna Petunia came from the back of the house and smiled at the little girl. "Do you want a piece of pie? I baked cherry pie for dessert. You must be Flo. Opal has told me wonderful things about you."

When Opal saw that Flo was in good hands, she shut the door, turning to face Nathaniel in the darkness. "I can't marry a man I don't even know. I wish you wouldn't have asked me that in front of Flo."

"I knew if I asked in front of Florence, you'd have a harder time saying no," he told her honestly. He reached out a hand to touch her cheek. "Before you say no, may I kiss you? I'm hoping that I can persuade you to at least think about it." He knew he shouldn't be quite so honest about his intentions, but there had been enough lies between him and his first wife, that he wanted to make sure everything was open with Opal.

Opal nodded slowly. She'd never been kissed, and she was sure he'd realize it as soon as he touched her, but she couldn't say no to him. She was too curious about what it would feel like to be so intimate with a man.

He took a step closer, all too aware that someone could look outside at any moment and see them together. He cupped her face in his hands, vowing to himself he would touch her nowhere else unless she agreed to it.

He lowered his head to hers, his tongue reaching out to touch her upper lip softly, before his mouth brushed hers.

Opal sucked in a breath, surprised he'd touched her with his tongue. Were men supposed to do that? His lips felt so soft against hers. She moved her hands up and put them on his shoulders, stroking them through his jacket. It was early April, and there was still a chill in the air at night in Central Texas.

Nathaniel poured all of his emotion into his lips, toying with hers. He wanted her to know that touching a man, him in particular, could only bring pleasure to her.

After a moment, Opal pulled away from him, feeling dazed. What had just happened? "I—" She put her hands to her lips, startled.

"Give me an answer when you're ready," he said, stroking her cheek with his fingertips. "I could make you feel good. My daughter already adores you. Why not?" He took a step back. "Let's go see what shenanigans my daughter is up to, shall we?"

Opal opened the door, leading the way into the house. She found Edna Petunia with Flo at the table, and they were both eating a piece of pie.

"Don't look at me like that, Opal," Edna insisted. "This may be my second piece of pie, but I couldn't let this sweet girl eat alone!"

Opal shook her head, chuckling. "I would never get onto you for too many pieces of pie."

"Sarah Jane would say it's gluttony," Edna mumbled.

"Sarah Jane doesn't need to inflict her standards on the rest of us," Opal responded. "In fact, I'm going to have a piece of pie as well. Would you like some pie, Nathaniel?"

"I believe I would," he answered, taking a seat at the table with his daughter and Edna Petunia. He watched her leave to get the pie and looked at Flo. "Is the pie any good?"

Flo nodded. "Did she say she'd marry you?"

He shook his head. "No, but she's thinking about it."

Edna Petunia looked between the father and daughter. "You're trying to talk Opal into marrying you?"

"Yup. I think she'd make me a good wife. And I know she'd be a wonderful mother to Florence."

"She's a good girl. I'm not sure I'm ready to give her up, though. Her twin just got married!" Edna Petunia looked sad at the prospect.

"She told me you adopted her and fourteen other orphans. How long has she lived with you?"

"Oh not long. Only about a year. That doesn't mean I love her any less, though. I've spent my life wanting a whole mess of bastard children to love. Now that I have them, they all think they need to run off and marry and leave me!"

"Bastard children? They're all bastards? That's surprising. I thought most orphans were from parents who had died for one reason

or another." He didn't care whether or not Opal was a bastard, of course. She was obviously a decent young lady, and he needed a wife who didn't mind that he had a daughter.

Opal stepped into the room. "Only a couple of us are really bastards. Edna Petunia likes to think we all are, though. She loves bastards."

"I see," Nathaniel said, not really seeing at all. Why would anyone want to pretend children were bastards when they weren't?

Opal put a piece of pie on the table in front of Nathaniel and sat down next to him with her own piece.

Nathaniel took one bite of the pie, and looked at Edna Petunia, love in his eyes. "If Opal won't marry me, I'd be honored if you would."

Edna Petunia cackled. "I'm a good cook. What's surprising is no one really knew that until I married last year. I hid my light under a bushel. Why I probably could have married much earlier in life if I'd cooked for men. I tell my girls all the time that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach. I wish they'd just listen to me!"

"I believe you. I think I'm falling a little more in love with you with every bite."

Opal rolled her eyes, enjoying her pie. "I don't believe I could marry such a fickle man. Why, he already has his eye on another man's wife in case I say no!"

Nathaniel sighed. "I guess I am fickle, but did you taste this pie? The chicken pie at supper was just as good though."

"That's because Sarah Jane made it," Opal said. "You won't be getting a wonderful cook by marrying me. I'm a fair cook, don't get me wrong, but I can't hold a candle to Edna Petunia or Sarah Jane."

"You didn't make the chicken pie we ate for supper?" he asked. "Where's Sarah Jane? I can ask her to marry me!" He squeezed Opal's free hand under the table, trying to let her know that he was joking.

Opal shook her head at him, before looking at Flo. "He wants to marry Sarah Jane, not me."

"Oh, no. Papa's smarter than that! He'll marry you." Flo kept eating her pie as if the interruption hadn't happened. She obviously knew her father well. They seemed to be a good team.

Opal watched the two of them, surprised by how close they seemed to be. She had not been impressed with him when Flo had first talked about him, but perhaps he was a better man than she realized. He was certainly a good kisser.

She blushed as the thought popped into her head.

Nathaniel grinned at her. "What were you thinking that has you blushing that way?" he asked.

She started to not answer, but really? Who would she offend?

Edna Petunia wouldn't care, and Flo was too young to care. "I was thinking about what a good kisser you are."

Nathaniel blushed at that. "Your—Edna Petunia is here!" He had no idea how he was supposed to refer to the old woman.

Opal shrugged. "Edna Petunia doesn't care if I talk about kissing you in front of her. Do you?"

Edna Petunia shook her head. "Not at all. Why, if Flo wasn't here, I'd ask if you used tongue!"

"But—She's right here!"

"That's why I didn't ask. See? I can be circumspect. None of my girls think I can." Edna Petunia winked at Opal.

"But—" Nathaniel sputtered. "I—"

"No use arguing with her," Opal told him, continuing to eat her pie. "Edna Petunia always wins."

"You do?" Nathaniel asked the older woman. "Why do you always win?"

"I just do. I think people are afraid to argue with someone my age. Think I'll keel over dead from a heart attack or something." Edna Petunia looked at Nathaniel. "You're not afraid I'll keel over dead? I'm old!"

He shook his head. "I don't think there's anything fragile about you at all, Edna Petunia."

Edna Petunia sighed. "So glad someone sees me for exactly what I am. It's a nice change." She winked at him as she picked up her plate and Flo's. "You want more?"

Flo shook her head. "No, thank you."

"Well, come with me then. We'll go tell Cletus that your papa asked Opal to marry him. The next sound we all hear will be his screams." She took the girl's hand and the two of them left the room.

Nathaniel looked at Opal. "Will it really bother him?"

Opal shrugged. "Probably. He takes his role as father-figure to fifteen young ladies very seriously."

Nathaniel sighed, forking up the last bite of his pie. "Well, let's go talk to him then. Better to get it over with."

"Sure." She ate her last bite too, carrying both plates into the kitchen and rinsing them. "They're probably in the informal parlor."

"You have two parlors?"

"We have sixteen people living in this house. We need six parlors." Opal led the way through the house, saying a little prayer that Cletus would go easy on Nathaniel.

Chapter Four

Cletus was sitting on the couch, a book in his hand. He laid it down as Opal and Nathaniel walked into the room. "What's this the old bat is telling me about you proposing to one of my little girls?" he asked Nathaniel. "I haven't even met you yet."

Nathaniel held his hand out for the man. "It's nice to meet you, sir. I'm Nathaniel Reid."

"Wish I could say the same. I'm not going to though." Cletus shook Nathaniel's hand, but his face was grumpy.

"You have many other girls, don't you? You don't need this one. I only have one little girl. I need another."

"Edna says you kissed her. You use tongue?" Cletus asked.

Nathaniel looked around the room to see if his daughter was there, and let out a relieved breath when she wasn't. "No, I didn't use tongue. She pulled away too fast."

Cletus shook his head. "Not really a kiss if you don't use tongue, boy! Why waste your time?"

Opal shook her head. "You need to stop spending so much time with Edna Petunia. You're getting as bad as she is!"

"Oh, she told me to ask," Cletus responded.

"I can't believe you'd ask that in mixed company," Nathaniel said, looking over at Opal. "Do they always talk this way around you?"

"Oh no. Sometimes they're much worse! You should hear what Edna Petunia said right before my sister got married." She blushed as she thought about Edna telling Ruby that she didn't feel like explaining about newly-weds playing 'hide the pickle.' "No, you shouldn't. Better if you don't."

Nathaniel felt as if he'd walked into a house full of crazy people. He had to get Opal out as quick as he could! Why, their bad manners and strange topics of conversation might just rub off on her.

Cletus looked at Nathaniel, all serious for a change. "What do you do for a living? I've never seen you around town."

"I'm a rancher. My wife died about six months ago, and I'm trying to raise little Florence on my own. She's a good girl, but I know I'm not doing right by her. I don't think I realized just how much her education was lacking until I met Opal, and she started helping out around the house."

"I suppose every little girl should have a mother." Cletus rubbed the back of his neck, seemingly very agitated. "Every old man should have a beautiful daughter to take care of him as well. I do have many

beautiful daughters."

"Why don't we leave the decision up to Opal? She's made me think she's going to just tell me no anyway." Nathaniel frowned at Opal.

"Why? You didn't like the boy's kiss?" Cletus asked Opal.

Opal blushed. "I'm not answering that. What's wrong with you, Cletus? You shouldn't be asking me that question! You're supposed to tell me never to kiss a man before I marry him, aren't you?"

Cletus shrugged. "Now why would I do that? First time I met Edna Petunia, she bent over, lifted her skirts, and showed me her pretty little bottom. Sure didn't stop me from marrying her! I think you need to make sure that you're compatible with your future husband. How will you know if you don't kiss him?"

"Sarah Jane says she won't kiss a man unless she's married to him."

Cletus rolled his eyes. "Sarah Jane needs someone to take her in hand. Hopefully the man who can do it will move into town within the next few years. She's only sixteen now, but when she's ready, she's going to need a strong man." He turned his attention back to Nathaniel. "You should kiss her again. I think that's what she's waiting on. No woman can make a decision as big as marriage without a tongue kiss."

Nathaniel had enough of being teased about kissing Opal. "Do you want me to do it here so you can give me pointers?"

Cletus grinned. "I think that's a brilliant idea. Go ahead." Cletus leaned on his elbow watching the other man who was still standing.

Opal had taken a seat in a chair, and was stunned when Nathaniel actually turned to her and took her hand, pulling her to her feet. "He's not going to let us get away with not kissing again right away. So let's do it."

"No! You can't be serious!" She put her hands out in front of her to keep him from getting too close.

"Now, Opal, the man just wants to show you that he's the right man for you. Would you keep him from proving that to you?"

"Of course I would! Cletus, you can't just order a man to kiss one of your girls and expect him to do it. It's not right."

"Well, I do like the idea of kissing you," Nathaniel said softly. "C'mere and let me show the man that I know how to kiss you right."

"You're both crazy. No, I will not kiss you in front of him, just so he can say if he likes it or not. It's not right."

Nathaniel sighed. "I don't think he'll ever let you marry me now. That's too bad."

Opal rolled her eyes. She didn't think she wanted to marry the

man, but if she changed her mind in the future, it should be her right. She fisted her hands in the front of his shirt and pulled him toward her, going up on tiptoe to brush his lips with hers. She had no idea what a 'tongue kiss' was, so she made no attempt at all on that front.

Nathaniel grinned when he saw his ploy had worked. He grabbed her, and pulled her closer to him, his lips immediately taking over the kiss. His tongue traced her lips, and when she finally opened her mouth for him, he stroked her tongue with his.

Opal felt like she was doing something incredibly naughty, and she *liked* it. How could she enjoy kissing someone in front of Cletus? Finally she broke away from the kiss, a bit out of breath, her chest heaving.

Cletus shook his head at her. "Go ahead and say yes now, girl. You'll regret it otherwise." He picked up his book and continued reading, obviously dismissing them from his presence.

Nathaniel gripped her hand and pulled her to the front door and outside with him. "I want to keep kissing you."

Opal shook her head. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Marry me, Opal. We could have the preacher perform the ceremony after church on Sunday." He felt more for her than he ever had another woman. His first wife had been deceitful, and it had only taken him a short time to realize he didn't feel the kind of love for her he'd thought he did.

"That's too soon. Edna Petunia would have a fit if I got married that fast. That's what Ruby did, and she still mumbles about it."

"What exactly does she mumble?" Nathaniel asked, curious.

Opal shrugged. "It's hard to understand, because she's mumbling, but it's usually something like, 'Now I understand how Mrs. Sullivan felt.'"

"Who is Mrs. Sullivan?"

"I'm not sure, but I think it's Dr. Iris's mother. Edna Petunia will never answer when we ask."

"They're—odd people." He didn't want to offend her, but he couldn't think of another way to classify her 'family.'

"They are! Very odd. How do you feel knowing that they'll be a part of your life forever if you marry me?"

He shrugged. "I can deal with it if you can deal with me. Are you going to marry me?"

"I don't know! I—I enjoy kissing you. I think you know that. I just don't feel as if I know you well enough. And you've not been a widower for very long. Are you sure you're ready to marry already?"

"I'm sure." He didn't want to complain about his Stella, but she'd eventually have to know everything. He knew that. It wasn't time yet.

"I haven't made a decision, and I won't for a day or two at least. I need to think about it. I do love Flo—and your kisses. I'm just not sure if I'm ready to make the kind of commitment marriage is. I'm only eighteen."

He nodded, understanding completely. "I'll give you the time you need, but don't keep me waiting forever. Florence needs a good mother." He couldn't stand Florence's name being shortened to Flo. That's what Stella had done, and it had annoyed him as much then as it did now.

"She told me her name was Flo. You call her Florence?"

"Only her mother ever called her Flo. I have never liked the shortened version of her name."

"Oh, I'm sorry! Do you want me to call her Florence then?"

"If she asked you to call her Flo, then call her that. I want her to be happy with her name." He looked at the door. "It's getting late. We should be getting home."

Opal nodded. "Probably." She took a step toward him, knowing she shouldn't even as she did it. "One more kiss before you go." She stood on tiptoe and pressed her lips to his, feeling a thrill run through her body when he closed his arms around her, kissing her.

This time it was Nathaniel who broke the kiss. "Think hard, Opal."

"I—I'll just go get Florence." She had such a hard time stringing a sentence together when he kissed her. Why did he affect her so? She opened the door and hurried through the house, searching for the girl. She found her with Katie and Hattie.

"Your papa is ready to go," Opal told her.

"Aw. I was having fun."

"I know. It's getting late, though, and you two need to get home." Opal walked toward the stairs with Florence right behind her. "He's waiting for you out front."

"Did you tell him you'd marry him?" Flo asked.

"I told him I'd think about it. I can't make that kind of decision without thinking long and hard about it."

"I want you to marry us. You'd be a good mama."

Opal smiled, hugging the girl. "I would love to have you as a daughter." *I'm just not sure I'm ready to have your papa as a husband.*

"Then you should marry us! We could all live happily ever after!"

Opal laughed. "Has someone been telling you fairy tales?"

"My papa tells me fairy tales before bed every night. He keeps telling me that we're waiting for my prince on a big white horse to come along so I can ride off into the sunset with him."

"I'm sure he'll be at your house the instant you're old enough to

marry."

"When will that be?" Flo asked. "Is there an age?"

"You know, I'm not sure. I don't feel old enough to marry even now, but I am. Lots of girls are mothers by the time they're my age."

"They are? How come you're not a mother yet then?"

"I guess I just haven't found my Prince Charming yet." Opal wasn't sure how else to explain it.

"Is my papa your Prince Charming then?" Florence asked.

"I guess we'll see, won't we?"

When they got outside, Opal smiled at Flo. "I'll see you in the morning. We're going to learn to bake bread and sew a dress tomorrow."

"And make something tasty for supper?" Flo asked, obviously only interested in the food she'd get.

Opal grinned. "Maybe we should all three come here for supper instead? Edna Petunia would love having guests. She especially loves little girls."

Nathaniel nodded at that. "I'll make sure I get to the house early tomorrow so we can come over." He reached out and took Opal's hand before they left, squeezing it tight.

Opal watched the two of them walk away, the road lit up by the moonlight. How was she going to be able to decide what to do?

Chapter Five

Opal tossed and turned all night, feeling the burden of the decision she needed to make weighing heavily on her mind. On the one hand, she didn't like the idea of marrying so quickly, but she knew that Flo needed a mother now, not in a year or however long she felt like being courted.

Also, she couldn't ask Nathaniel to wait. When he kissed her, she could feel the fire of his passion burning for her. The man was much too—interested—for her to be able to tell him she wanted to wait. No, if she said no, she knew that would be it, and she wouldn't be able to spend much time with them. But if she said yes, the wedding would need to happen almost immediately.

What she really needed to do was talk to Mrs. Hayes, or better yet to Ruby, about her dilemma. Ruby had just gone through the same thing. Surely she would be able to give good advice. But when?

Even before she went down to breakfast Saturday morning, she wrote a quick note to Ruby.

"My dear sister,

I'm trying to make a major decision, and I badly need to talk it over with you. There's no one else I trust as I do my twin. Will you come to the small house just out of town, off the road to the Sanders' house for lunch today? The boys may come as well. I just need my sister.

Missing you,
Opal"

She gave the letter to Martha on her way down to breakfast. "Will you take that into town to Ruby? I'll give you a penny."

Martha shook her head. "You don't have to pay me. I'll do it. After breakfast?"

"That would be perfect. Thank you, Martha."

Martha nodded. She never said much, and she was always a bit distant from the others. Opal had tried hard to be her friend and draw her out, but nothing had worked.

"Are you going to marry that man?" Martha asked.

Opal shrugged. "I have no idea. I'm going to talk to Ruby first. I need to tell her what's going on. It helps to discuss things with her."

"I wish I had a twin," Martha said softly.

"You do? Why?"

"Because it seems like you have a built in best friend. Someone who will always be on your side and listen when you need someone to talk to."

Opal nodded. "It is like that. I used to not like being a twin, but I didn't realize just how much I'd miss my sister when she moved out."

"Maybe you'll have twins some day."

Opal laughed. "Wouldn't that be something? If both Ruby and I had twins?"

After breakfast, Opal and Martha walked together as far as Nathaniel's house. "Do you want me to come back and help with anything?" Martha asked as they parted ways.

"Why don't you stop by on your way back, and I'll let you know?" Opal didn't know what she planned for the day, other than sewing the pieces of the dress she'd cut out together. "Oh, and would you get some flour?" She dug into her pocket and offered Martha some money. "I don't have enough to finish the day's cooking."

Martha looked down at the money in her hand. "I will get it. Seems strange that you'd buy them flour."

Opal shrugged. "I don't know what they can and can't afford."

Martha just nodded, her brown eyes wide. "I'll be back in a bit." She walked off toward town while Opal went into the small house.

Florence flew at her from across the room. "I'm so glad you're here! What are we going to do today?" she asked.

"Well, we're going to bake some bread as soon as Martha comes back, and then we'll give both bedrooms a good cleaning, and I'll work on your dress. I cut out all the pieces last night." Opal showed Florence the small basket she carried.

"My pretty dress! When will it be finished?"

Opal shrugged. "I've never made a little girl dress before. Soon probably."

"I'll help you!" Florence offered. "I've been a little girl my whole life!"

"Well, that will be a big help," Opal said with a laugh. She looked in the kitchen. "We'd better start with the breakfast dishes."

They worked side by side to get the dishes done and return the kitchen to rights. Opal was surprised by just how messy the two were with their cooking. No wonder it had taken so long for her to clean that first day she'd come over.

Once the dishes were done, they started on the bedrooms, washing down the walls and scrubbing the floors. Opal climbed the steep ladder up to the loft where she scrubbed the walls. She was surprised at the size of the bed in the little girl's room. "What a big

bed you have!"

"It had to be that big so I could share with mama. If you become my mama, will you share the bed with me?"

Opal blinked a couple of times in surprise. Why had Opal's mother shared a room with her? She'd never been married, but she knew that wasn't right. "I don't know. We'll ask your papa."

Just then there was a call from downstairs. "Opal? Are you here? I have your flour!"

Opal leaned over the loft and waved. "Up here. Put the flour on the table, would you?"

"Sure!" Martha set the flour on the table and walked to the foot of the stairs. "Want me to finish cleaning up there? Are you baking bread today?"

"Would you mind? I am baking bread, and I'm hoping that I'll have some ready in time for lunch." Opal carefully climbed down the stairs.

"Ruby said to tell you that she'd be here for lunch, but she'd leave the boys at home so you two could talk."

"Oh good. I was hoping we'd have an opportunity to just chat for a bit."

"What about Flo?" Martha asked softly.

"I don't know. I'll send her to do something outside or something. I'll make it work."

"I can stay if it would help," Martha offered.

"Oh, thank you! I don't really need help. Wait—Could you take her for a walk as soon as Ruby gets here? Maybe for about fifteen minutes? Then she can have lunch with us?" Opal smiled at Martha. "You're welcome to eat with us as well, of course."

"Thanks, but I'll go home. I've eaten your cooking and Sarah Jane's cooking. I'll take hers any day."

Opal didn't take offense. She knew she was a mediocre cook, and she was nothing compared to Sarah Jane. "I can understand that. I'd eat her cooking over mine as well."

Martha went up the steps and resumed cleaning up there, while Opal started to mix the dough for the bread she wanted to bake. She decided to use some of the dough to make cinnamon rolls as well. It would be nice if the father and daughter thought of her while she wasn't around.

It was about an hour later that Ruby knocked at the door of the house. Opal had just put two loaves of bread into the oven. "I'm just making sandwiches for lunch today."

Ruby shrugged. "I like sandwiches."

Martha came down the steps followed by Flo. "We're going to take a walk. We'll see you in a little while."

Ruby watched the other two leave before turning her full attention to Opal. "Martha said you were thinking about marrying. I had no idea. Is that the little girl who was in the mercantile the other day?"

Opal nodded. "It is. She wanted the flowers for her mother's grave." Opal briefly recounted all she knew of Flo and Nathaniel. "And now he wants me to marry him."

"What do you want?" Ruby asked.

"I don't know! He's nice enough, and I adore Florence, but I'm not certain that I'm ready to be anyone's wife."

"Has he kissed you?" Ruby asked. "For me that's what told me that I was ready to marry Lewis."

"How so? You'd been kissing David forever!" David had been one of the orphans back in New York. When Ruby had left, he'd promised to send for her.

"Well when David kissed me, it was nice, but it didn't make anything happen inside me. You know?" Ruby stared at her sister as if trying to determine if she *did* know what she meant.

"Oh, I know." Opal blushed. "Nathaniel's kisses make me want to drag him to the altar myself. I feel like my whole body is on fire," she whispered.

Ruby nodded. "That's what I expected. So you can marry him. Marrying David would have been a huge mistake for me. I can't imagine how I would have done with him. His kisses left me cold."

"Instead of on fire? Really? You always talked like you loved David."

"I did, but it wasn't until much later that I realized I loved him as a brother. Not as a lover." Ruby blushed as she said the word lover.

"I felt like David was a brother as well, but not Nathaniel. When he kisses me, it really moves me."

"This is his house?" Ruby asked.

Opal nodded. "I'd live here if I agreed."

"There's no indoor plumbing, and you're used to that luxury. That's something to think about."

"There is a water pump in the kitchen, which would keep me from having to haul buckets of water from the well." Opal shook her head. "His wealth isn't something that I want to factor into this. I can live on nothing. I just need to be certain he's a man I can respect and spend the rest of my life with."

Ruby smiled. "And? Is he?"

"I think so. Do you ever regret marrying so young? And marrying a man with two young boys?"

"I don't. I feel like I made the best decision. I would do it

again."

Opal took a deep breath. "And you'll be my maid of honor?"

"Does that mean you're going to say yes?" Ruby looked excited at the prospect.

"I think I am. I know that he makes me feel things I've never felt. And I love his daughter with everything inside me. I don't want to say yes because I have no other prospects. There are enough cowboys in this town that it would be easy to choose from one of them. I don't think that would be a smart idea, though. I don't have feelings for any of them."

Ruby laughed. "You sound so confused about the whole thing. When he kisses you, are you still confused? Or just ready to say yes to anything he asks you?"

"Yes to anything," Opal admitted, hating to say the words aloud. She'd always thought of herself as a strong, independent woman.

"Marry him. You should wear Mrs. Hayes's dress. I did. She won't mind if you do as well."

Opal laughed. "All of us will go through that dress before we're done. It's a good thing we've always been able to share dresses, and we know there's no need to fit it to me." She turned to the stove, quickly frying some ham to serve with the bread she'd just baked for lunch.

The two of them worked together, setting everything on the table just as the door opened. Opal turned, expecting to see Martha and Florence come in the door. Instead, she saw Nathaniel. "I wasn't expecting you!"

"Oh, I always come home for lunch. Is there enough?"

Opal bit her lip. "I can fry up a bit more ham. It's no problem."

Ruby hugged her sister. "Instead, I'll go back home and eat there. I'm glad we got a bit of time together."

Nathaniel eyed Ruby. "Aren't you Lewis's new wife?"

Ruby nodded. "I'm Ruby. I'm also Opal's twin sister."

Nathaniel looked back and forth between the two of them. "You sure don't look much alike."

"My sister is much prettier than I am," Opal told him, repeating her words from the night before. "I'll talk to you soon." She waved at her sister who left the house, heading back toward town.

"I didn't mean to chase her away," Nathaniel said, looking around. "Where's Florence?"

"She's with Martha. I wanted to have a few minutes to talk to my sister in private, so they went for a walk."

"Oh, I see. Did you and your sister get everything talked out?" he asked.

"We did." Opal looked him in the eye. "I've decided to marry

you."

He gaped at her for a moment, surprised that she would just casually announce it like that. Then he let out a whoop and scooped her up into his arms, swinging her in a quick circle, his mouth crushing down on hers as soon as he put her back on her feet.

Opal wrapped her arms around him, clinging to him. "I guess you're happy?"

He just laughed, holding her tight.

Chapter Six

The door opened again, and this time it was Florence and Martha. Martha saw the two of them embracing and smiled. "I'm going to go back to the house now. Is there good news for me to share?"

Opal blushed. "Tell them I'm getting married."

Florence looked between Opal and her papa, finally letting out a squeal. "We're going to be a family!"

Nathaniel reached down, pulling her into the hug he was sharing with Opal. "We sure are."

Martha softly closed the door, leaving them alone.

"When?" Nathaniel asked. "I don't want a long engagement. I think Monday is plenty long enough."

"You're going to make Edna Petunia mumble again," Opal told him. "Do you know what she's like to live with when she's mumbling?"

"No, and you'll only have to live with her for two days of it if we marry Monday. If we wait 'til next weekend, you have to put up with a whole week of it."

Opal laughed. "The way your mind works truly amazes me."

"I'm an amazing man." He glanced at the table. "And I'm hungry. I'll convince you to marry me tomorrow while we eat."

"Tomorrow? I thought you wanted to marry on Monday!" Opal protested.

"Monday it is! Great idea." He filled his plate and winked at her.

Opal looked at Florence who had settled herself at the table, but was watching the two adults with wide eyes. "When is Monday?" she asked, buttering a slice of bread for herself.

"Not tomorrow but the next day," Opal told her.

"That's soon. And then you'll live here, and I won't have to sleep alone anymore."

Nathaniel looked slightly embarrassed by that. "No, Florence. Opal is going to share my room with me." He looked down at his food as he said it, avoiding Opal's gaze.

"She is? That's strange." Florence seemed to be sad about her father's announcement. "I don't snore. I think she'd rather share a room with me."

Opal blushed. "Married couples sleep in the same bed."

"Weren't you married to Mama?" Florence asked.

Nathaniel wasn't sure how to respond to that question, so he

stayed quiet.

Opal cut up a piece of ham for Florence, trying to figure out what they weren't telling her. "Here you go." She slid the pieces from her own plate to the little girl's, applying herself to her sandwich. "Edna Petunia will bake a cake to celebrate our engagement," Opal told them. "I'm sure we'll have it with supper since Martha is going home with the news."

"And then you'll cook all the time, Opal?" Florence asked, getting excited for the wedding again.

"Then I'll cook all the time. I'll make sure to have Sarah Jane help sometimes, so I can get good at it." Truthfully, Opal knew she was a decent cook. She just always felt as if she was lacking when compared with Sarah Jane's skills.

Nathaniel's hand reached out and took Opal's squeezing it. "We'll see you at church in the morning."

Opal frowned at that. "Do you usually go? I don't recall seeing you there."

"I don't usually." He shrugged. "I've had a hard time with things like that since I came to Texas."

"You're not from here?" Opal asked, wondering why she didn't already know that. She'd just agreed to marry a man who was a virtual stranger to her. "Where did you live before Texas?"

Nathaniel gulped down the last of his milk, standing up. "I was born and raised in Kentucky. We moved here while Stella was carrying Florence." He leaned down and kissed Opal before going to Florence and kissing her forehead. "I'll be home a little early tonight, so we can go to your house for dinner."

He put his cowboy hat on his head as he left.

As soon as he'd left, Opal looked at Florence. "The only thing we have to do this afternoon is get your dress made. Think we can have it ready for you to wear to the wedding on Monday?"

Florence smiled happily. "Oh, I hope so. I'll look like a princess in it!" She twirled around the kitchen, holding her skirt out as if she were dancing with a prince.

"You certainly will!"

Opal had just finished the dress when Nathaniel got home that evening. Florence ran to the door wearing it. "Look what Opal made me! Don't I look like a princess?"

Nathaniel laughed and dropped to one knee. "You do look like a princess. I'd better lock the door so your Prince won't ride his horse

right into the house to get you!"

Florence giggled. "Princes don't ride horses into houses, Papa! Princes are smart and always have good manners."

Nathaniel grinned at Opal. "And I'm not letting a prince show me up. I'm going to go kiss my beautiful bride in greeting, so she'll know I have good manners, too."

Opal stood and watched him walk toward her with a smile on her face. She raised her lips to meet his, her hand going to the back of his neck to hold him in place just a second longer.

"We should really start walking," she told him, after she'd pulled away. "Edna Petunia will have dinner ready any minute." She hated being late for anything, and it made her a little crazy when she was late because of circumstances beyond her control.

"Will they wait for us?" he asked.

"Probably. Depends on Cletus's mood. If he's hungry, Edna Petunia will sometimes serve supper without everyone being there."

He grinned. It sounded just like the cantankerous old woman to do that. "Let's go then!" He headed for the door, not bothering to change his clothes. He felt like he should be well-dressed in her presence, but really? She'd seen him in his work clothes only, and she'd agreed to marry him. Why dress up?

While they walked, Florence talked about everything under the sun. They were almost to the house when she let out a loud gasp. "I didn't change back to my work dress, Opal. What if I spill something on my special princess dress?" The horror in her voice made Opal want to laugh.

"We'll get some towels from Edna Petunia, and we'll cover your dress, so there's no danger of that. Don't you worry about a thing." Opal was proud the little girl wanted to wear a dress she'd made for the occasion. She wasn't a great seamstress, but the dress had turned out nicely, and Florence looked quite pretty in it.

As soon as they were inside, Opal asked Edna Petunia for a towel to cover Florence's dress while they ate. "She's worried she'll mess it up, and she won't be able to wear it for the wedding."

"There'll be plenty of time to wash it before the wedding," Edna Petunia told Opal. "I'm thinking a fall wedding would be nice. We could have pumpkins as part of the centerpieces. It'll be lovely."

Opal smiled. "We already set the date."

"You did? Well, September or October would work. Even November would make me happy. What were you thinking?"

"Monday."

Edna Petunia's eyes widened. "Monday? Do you girls have any idea what you're doing to me? Mary Sullivan deserves to be canonized. I swear the woman is a saint! And she's not even

Catholic! Why if only one of her daughters had any respect for her, she'd have been able to plan a wedding. With eight of them, you'd think it would happen. But no. I have fifteen daughters, and I bet not one of them will let me plan a wedding." She looked toward the dining room and bellowed at the top of her lungs. "Katie! Get in here!"

Katie all but ran into the kitchen. "What did I do?"

"I want you to promise me you will give me at least six months to plan your wedding. Do you hear me? Six months! Or if not six months, you have to give me time to plan a nice reception, and you have to pretend you weren't already married for the reception. Promise me, Katie!"

Katie looked from Opal to Edna Petunia, her eyes wide. "I promise?"

Edna Petunia engulfed Katie in a hug. "And that's why you'll always be my favorite!"

Opal bit her lip, trying not to burst out laughing. Edna Petunia was in full form tonight, and nothing was going to stop her. "I'm going to wear Mrs. Hayes's wedding dress. What do you think of that, Edna Petunia?"

"Well, it's nice to finally have some say in the wedding of my second oldest. Why, you and Ruby had better be the exception in this house. I will not tolerate everyone getting engaged and then married just a few days later. It's unacceptable! Do you hear me?"

Opal smiled at the older woman as if she didn't think she'd lost her mind. She realized then that Nathaniel was still behind her, and she turned around, whispering, "Go get Cletus. He's the only one who can calm her down when she gets this way!"

Nathaniel had no idea what was going on, but he headed for the back of the house and the older man. As usual, he was sitting in the informal parlor with a book in front of his face. "Cletus, Edna Petunia is upset and she's saying some crazy things to Opal. Opal asked me to come and get you."

Cletus sighed, putting his book down and getting to his feet. "Did you two tell her you were getting married before fall? Because that's the only thing that I can think of that would make her act like a crazed woman."

At the embarrassed look on Nathaniel's face, he sighed. "You did, didn't you?"

Nathaniel shrugged. "I don't want to wait 'til fall to get married. I want to marry on Monday."

"Monday? Oh, she's probably losing her mind. I'll get in there before she starts throwing dishes. I don't want to lose the china that's been in my family for generations. Why, we had it back in England

before we immigrated. No point in letting the old bat ruin it."

"No, there's not." Nathaniel trailed behind Cletus, following him to the kitchen. He was interested to see how things would play out.

Cletus walked into the kitchen with his hands raised, as if to show that he was unarmed. He wrapped his arms around the spunky old woman and pulled her against him. "There there, Edna Petunia. You have thirteen other girls to give you a respectable amount of time to plan a wedding. You can make a beautiful cake for this one, right? That'll be nice."

Edna Petunia glared at Nathaniel over Cletus's shoulder. "Get that man out of my kitchen. He's forcing my baby girl to marry him when she's not ready."

"But—" Nathaniel started.

Opal grabbed his arm and pulled him out. "She's gone off her rocker again. She didn't meet me until I was seventeen. I've never been her baby girl. She just wants to plan a big wedding, and it makes her angry that we're not letting her do it. She's being stubborn."

"Should we give her more time?" he asked, feeling guilty for marrying Opal so quickly.

"No, it's fine. We have a right to marry whenever we want to."

Florence pulled at Opal's sleeve. "Is she mad at me as well?"

Opal turned and pulled Florence into her arms. "Of course not, Florence. She's only mad at your papa and me, because we decided to marry so fast. She thinks we should take more time."

"She's really upset," Nathaniel said.

"I happen to know that she was only engaged for a few days herself. She's just being silly."

"Really? When did she marry? Do they have children of their own?"

Opal shook her head. "They got married just a little over a year ago. She was way too old to even think about having children. That's why she was so determined to adopt so many bastard girls."

"I see. So she's really just throwing a temper tantrum. I won't get too upset then."

"Oh, you shouldn't. I knew this was going to happen. I shouldn't have had you two come to dinner tonight. I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry for! I'm just pleased we're going to marry soon."

They went into the dining room to join the rest of the girls for supper. "She's losing it."

Evelyn grinned at Opal. "Wedding must be soon. Within the week?" she asked.

"Monday."

"I figured. You having it here?" Evelyn asked.

"No idea." Opal looked at Nathaniel. "Do you want to have the wedding here? Or at the church?"

"I hadn't really thought about it." He took her hand in his, gazing into her eyes. "Do you care either way?"

"Not really. I guess I always thought I'd have a church wedding, but Ruby was married here, and it was really nice." She shrugged. "It really doesn't matter either way."

Katie looked at Opal. "Let us do it here. If you can wait until Monday afternoon, we'll all be home from school, and we'll make it the best wedding ever."

"Will you sing?" Opal asked.

Katie grinned. "I'd be honored."

Opal looked at Florence. "And you'll be my flower girl?"

Florence nodded, bouncing in her seat a little. "Can I carry bluebonnets? To match my dress?"

"Of course you can! They're my favorite flower!" They hadn't been before, but now she thought of Florence in conjunction with bluebonnets, so they were her favorite.

By the time Edna Petunia and Cletus came into the dining room with the food, the wedding was pretty much planned out. "Will you give me away, Cletus?" Opal asked.

He nodded, motioning his head toward Edna Petunia. Opal knew he wanted her to assign Edna Petunia to do something that she would consider an important task.

"Edna Petunia, I need the most beautiful hat you've ever made. Will you make me something special?" Opal asked. Edna Petunia had been a hat maker before she retired to help Iris's family. She had some of the most hideous hats Opal had ever seen, but she'd also made some beautiful ones. For whatever reason, she only wore the ugly ones.

Edna Petunia nodded regally. "I will make you a hat. And one for your flower girl as well. No flower girl would ever look like a princess without a hat."

"It needs to be blue to match my flowers and my dress," Florence told her.

"I can do that." Edna smiled at the little girl. "Even though I think they're getting married too fast, I'm thrilled that I get a wonderful little granddaughter like you sooner."

Florence grinned. "I'm happy to get you for a grandmother."

"Well, now that everyone is thrilled with everyone else, can we just eat?" Cletus asked, making everyone laugh.

Nathaniel looked at Opal, and realized his dreams were coming true.

Chapter Seven

Nathaniel brought Florence over to the Sanders' house before he headed out to work on Monday morning, promising he'd be there by four for the wedding. Florence was thrilled to be part of the excitement of getting ready for the wedding. She helped Edna Petunia make a wedding cake, and then she and Opal went for a walk to pick some bluebonnets.

Once Florence's arms were full, Opal said, "Leave some just to look pretty beside the road. This should be enough for our bouquets and to decorate the parlor. It will be beautiful."

Ruby showed up just after lunch and the two sisters spent time together while Florence helped decorate. "Are you nervous?" Ruby asked.

Opal nodded. "Of course, I am. Not so much about the wedding, but about the wedding night." She knew it wasn't proper for her to discuss it, even with her sister, but she felt like she was going to burst with anxiety.

"I'm sure it will be fine," Ruby told her. "Nathaniel seems gentle, and you do love his kisses."

"I hope it goes as well as I think it will," Opal said. Florence is staying here tonight, and Martha is going to bring her to me on her way to school in the morning."

"Are you going to keep working?"

Opal shook her head. "I will for the first week or so, to give Dr. Iris time to hire someone else. I don't want to leave her with no one to watch her children."

"I can understand that. It's not long until Dr. Iris has that baby, and then one of the girls still in school could take over for you. Could you take Florence to work with you?"

"I'm sure that wouldn't be a problem. When I talked to Dr. Iris at church yesterday, she was so grateful I was going to keep working until she found a replacement, she would have agreed to anything."

Ruby grinned. "I'm sure she would have!" She looked down for a moment. "I saw Dr. Iris this morning."

"Why? Are you sick?"

Ruby shook her head. "I'm expecting!"

"You are? Really? I'm going to be an aunt again?" Opal jumped off the bed she'd once shared with Ruby and flew across the room to hug her sister. "Telling me is the best wedding present you could have given me!"

"That's what I thought, so that's why I told you today. I've

suspected for a couple of weeks now. We just haven't had a chance to talk in what feels like forever!"

Loud noises rose from downstairs, and the two sisters looked at each other. "School's out," they said in unison.

"The boys were supposed to walk home with the girls, so my two are adding to the regular noise." Ruby shrugged. "Children are noisy."

Opal nodded. "Why didn't we ever notice that when we were children?"

"No idea."

The door burst open and ten girls piled into the room with them. Opal counted to be sure. Who was missing? Sarah Jane wasn't there, but she was probably downstairs, helping to get the food ready. Penny was missing. She was probably working on making sure the decorations were right. Martha was absent, but she rarely spent time with the other girls. And Florence must have stayed downstairs to help Edna Petunia and Sarah Jane. Everyone else was there.

And they were all talking at once. "How long before the wedding starts?" Katie asked.

"Just about forty-five minutes. You girls need to all go get ready."

"What about you?" Theresa asked. "You're not ready, and you're the bride."

"Ruby and I are about to get dressed. Everyone out." Opal stood up, gesturing toward the door. She loved all the girls, but she really only wanted to be with her sister right then.

"Are there any questions you want to ask me about the wedding night?" Ruby asked. "There's no one but you I'd answer them for, but I'll answer for you."

Opal shook her head. She did have some questions, but she'd rather ask her husband. He'd been married before, so surely he knew all about marital relations. "I think I know what I need to know. I'll be fine."

"Good. I have no desire to talk about that with anyone but my husband."

Opal laughed. "Then I'm honored you offered to talk to me about it."

"Let's get you into your dress." Ruby stood and held the dress, while Opal dropped her robe. She was wearing her undergarments beneath the robe.

Opal put her arms through the sleeves, and Ruby helped her fasten the dress. Together they walked to the mirror.

Opal felt like crying. "I feel honored to wear the same dress you and Mrs. Hayes both wore."

"Edna Petunia is probably going to sew another right away, just

so none of the others will need to wear the same one."

Opal laughed through the tears. "She's a cantankerous old woman, all right."

There was a knock on the door, and Ruby opened it. "Edna Petunia. Come in. She's all dressed."

Edna Petunia stood in her finest. A lavender silk gown, a hat with some sort of dead creature on it, and peppermint sticks in her cleavage. She looked just perfect to Opal. "You look beautiful, Edna Petunia."

"Oh don't give me that posh! I know better." Edna Petunia held up a box. "Brought your hat."

"Oh, let me see!" Opal opened the box and smiled as she removed a beautiful white hat with a short veil attached to the front. There were bluebonnets draped around the sides and front of the hat. "I'll match my new daughter."

"That you will." Edna Petunia put the hat on Opal's head for her. She touched her eye with a handkerchief. "Bug must've flew into my eye."

Opal smiled, thrilled that the old woman would cry for her. "Thank you so much for the hat."

"Happy to do it. Not happy to do it so fast, but happy to do it." Edna Petunia looked at Opal, looking a bit sick to her stomach. "Do I need to talk to you about the wedding night?"

Opal shook her head. "No, ma'am. Mrs. Hayes talked to all of us while we were still in New York."

"Well, hallelujah! That woman did something right with all of you!" Edna Petunia wiped her forehead with the handkerchief as she left the room. "Praise God! I don't have to explain how babies are made to these girls. The hardest part of parenting is over!"

The girls looked at one another and laughed when she closed the door behind her. "I don't think Edna Petunia wants to talk to you about your wedding night!" Ruby said.

"I think you might be right." Opal looked in the mirror again, adjusting her hat just a bit. "I think I'm ready."

"I know you are. You look beautiful. I always wanted to look like you."

"What? I always wanted to look like you. I tell everyone you're the prettier twin." Opal grinned at her sister, wondering what was making them so nostalgic all of a sudden.

"I've always considered you the prettier sister." Ruby grinned. "Just goes to show that we always want what we don't have." She took a deep breath. "We should go down. It's time."

The wedding flew by. Opal would remember very little of it later. Katie sang, and Florence stood proudly with her basket of

flowers. The kiss was the only thing she remembered later. A soft brush of Nathaniel's lips, and his eyes held a promise of love to come. She didn't know where the word love had come from in regard to him, but she felt like it was coming. Someday, she would have a marriage like her sister's. Like Edna Petunia's. Like Dr. Iris's. She would have a marriage filled with love. It wasn't starting out that way, but it was fine. Soon, her marriage would be perfect like theirs.

After the wedding, they had cake and punch. Florence danced around like the little princess her father treated her as. When it was time to go, Opal found Florence, hugging her close. "Martha is going to walk with you to the house in the morning, and then we're going to go straight to the Harveys' house. All right?"

"Yes'm. I'm happy you're my new mama!"

Opal grinned. "Me too! Have a good night with your new aunties!"

"I will!" Florence rushed over and hugged Nathaniel. "I'm going to miss you, Papa."

Nathaniel smiled, picking up the little girl so they were eye-level. "I'll miss you too, but I'll see you tomorrow night." He kissed the tip of her nose and put her back on the floor, watching as Florence rushed back to Katie and Hattie, who seemed to be her favorites of the orphans.

Nathaniel held his hand out for Opal. "Are you ready?" he asked.

Opal nodded, a grin on her face. On her way out the door, Sarah Jane pushed a basket into her hands. "A wedding gift from me. I baked you a pie, and made some fried chicken and mashed potatoes for your supper. No woman should be expected to cook on her wedding day."

"Oh, thank you!" Opal was thrilled to get the simple gift. She would have more time with her new groom thanks to Sarah Jane's thoughtfulness. They didn't have much time to be alone together, after all.

When she got out front, she was surprised to see a nice buggy parked there. She'd thought Nathaniel didn't have one, because they walked everywhere. "You brought a buggy?" she asked.

He shrugged. "I prefer to walk, but seeing as how we're all dressed up, I thought it would be best if we had a buggy to go home in." Truly, the buggy had been more for Stella's comfort than anything else. He didn't care to drive it, because it made him think of her.

"Since this isn't my dress, I really appreciate it. The other girls

will all need it as well," she said, taking his hand so he could help her into the buggy.

"Why will the other girls need it?" he asked, wondering why she looked so amused.

"It was Mrs. Hayes's wedding dress when we first moved to Texas. Now Ruby has worn it, and so have I. Ruby and I were joking that it would go through all fifteen of us."

He grinned. "Does Edna Petunia ever get jealous of how you girls feel about Mrs. Hayes?"

Opal shrugged. "She doesn't seem to, but I have no idea really. She knows we run to Mrs. Hayes if we have questions. Ruby and I more so than the others I think. The younger girls are learning to lean on Edna Petunia."

"It's odd to me that you all call her by her first name."

"It's what she told us to call her. It would have been strange calling her 'Mother,' because we were all older when she took us in. And she's so old. 'Grandmother' may have worked, but I think she's determined she's too young to be our grandmother."

They got to his small ranch, and he rushed around the wagon, helping her down. "I'll put the horses up. Why don't you go heat up whatever it is Sarah Jane sent for supper?"

Opal started a fire in the stove and put the food in the oven to reheat. She looked around the kitchen and smiled. Nathaniel and Florence had made sure the dishes were done up, so she wouldn't have to start out cleaning their messes. It was a nice surprise. She'd truly expected to have to do them herself as soon as she got there.

By the time he came back into the house, she had set the table and the food was warm. "It's ready," she said with a nervous smile. She hadn't changed out of her wedding dress, but she had pulled her biggest apron on to keep from messing it up.

Nathaniel washed his hands before sitting down, and Opal served them both. She was surprised at how incredibly nervous she was now that they were alone together. She'd agreed to this, though, and she couldn't back out now. She wanted to ask him for more time before the wedding night, but she didn't think he'd allow it. He was too antsy to wait.

Opal searched her brain for something to talk about while they ate, but she could think of nothing. She was much too nervous to come up with a topic for polite conversation.

He could see how nervous she was, and reached for her hand, holding it tightly in his. "It's all right."

Her eyes met his, and she gave a little laugh. "Am I so transparent then?"

"What's a wedding night without a nervous bride?" he asked. He

brought her hand to his lips, and kissed her fingertips. "I would tell you not to be nervous, but I'm nervous too."

"You are? Why? You've been married before!"

"I have," he agreed. "But you're a very different woman than Stella was."

When he said nothing else, she frowned at him. "Florence sure thought a lot of her."

"She was a good mother to Florence. She took good care of her, and treated her like a little princess. She wasn't much on household tasks, but she was good at making her daughter feel special." He didn't know if he was ready to talk about his marriage yet.

"Her daughter? Isn't she your daughter as well?" Opal frowned at him, wondering why he'd worded that so oddly.

"Actually, no, she's not. Stella was pregnant with Florence when she married me."

She looked at him with surprise. "Oh, I see."

He laughed, but the sound was harsh. "No, you don't see, but that's okay. It's probably better that way."

Opal blinked, trying to understand exactly what he was telling her. "Was she married before?" She knew some women got pregnant before they married, but she'd never known one who had.

He shook his head. "No. Florence's father was married to someone else."

"He was? Did you know she was carrying?"

"Not until we'd been married a few months. Everyone assumed the baby was mine, and I let them assume it. We moved here while she was still pregnant, because I didn't want people adding things up. I was off helping some friends in another state when she was conceived. When I got back, she was suddenly interested in me. Our mothers encouraged us to marry, because they'd been friends for years." Nathaniel shrugged. "I shouldn't have trusted her as I did. But how's a man to know that a woman is interested in him only because she's carrying another man's child?"

Opal swallowed hard, feeling badly for him. No wonder she'd never seen a resemblance between him and Florence. "You're sure she's not yours?"

He nodded. "I couldn't be more certain. There's no way she's mine."

"How do you know?" Opal asked. Did Florence look just like his first wife's lover? What a slap in the face that reminder would be.

He frowned. "I will tell you all this, but not *now*. Let's save this discussion for another time."

She nodded. "I understand." But she didn't. She wanted to understand, because it would help her know the man she'd married

better. He was right though. Their wedding night was not the time for such a discussion.

Chapter Eight

Nathaniel watched Opal do the dishes with a brooding look on his face. Why had he ever brought up his first marriage with her? She was as different from Stella as night and day. His first wedding was weighing heavy on his mind today, and it shouldn't have been. Today was a day for rejoicing.

When she finished the dishes, she turned back to him, a wary look on her face. She wished she knew what to say after all he'd revealed, but without knowing everything, there was really nothing she could say.

She removed her apron and walked to him, wishing to see the spark of excitement and happiness in his eyes again. She sat down on his lap, turning to him and pressing her lips to his, hoping that would bring him back to the man he'd been an hour before.

Nathaniel clutched her to him, kissing her passionately. His hands stroked over her sides and up to her breasts, cupping them in his hands.

Opal moaned and turned more fully toward him. "I don't know if I'm more nervous or excited about tonight," she whispered against his lips. "I know I probably shouldn't be excited, but—I like it when you touch me."

Her words brought Nathaniel the ease of mind he needed. "I'm so glad!" He clutched her to him, resting his forehead against hers for a moment. "Why don't you go get ready for bed? I'll step outside to give you time to change into your nightgown."

She looked at him for a moment, sensing he needed her with him. "Instead, why don't you help me take my wedding dress off?"

His eyes widened, and he grinned. "Really? You wouldn't mind?"

She shook her head, getting to her feet and taking his hand, leading him into his bedroom.

Nathaniel shut the door behind them, reaching for her. "I want to touch you so badly," he whispered.

"We're married. Touch me."

He needed no further invitation, pulling her to him and unfastening the buttons at the back of her dress. His hand slipped into the opening he made, but they hit her corset instead of bare flesh. Pushing her dress down over her hips, he turned her around so he could apply his attention to the lacings of her corset. "I will never understand how ladies breathe in these things!"

She shrugged. "We start wearing them when we're twelve or

thirteen. I've almost forgotten what it feels like to not wear a corset."

He kissed her shoulder as he pushed the constricting garment down to the floor. "How many layers of clothes are you wearing?"

She laughed. "A normal amount! A dress, corset, two petticoats. Drawers."

"It's harder than getting into a bank vault!"

"You think? I can undress myself quickly."

"Yes, but then I wouldn't have the pleasure of unwrapping you like you were a wedding present just for me."

She turned and looped her arms around his neck, her eyes dancing with laughter. "Am I not a wedding present just for you?"

"I like that." He leaned down and kissed her again, this time his lips were more insistent. "I need to finish unwrapping you, I think."

"How about I do a little unwrapping of my own?" Her hands went to his suit coat and she pushed it off his shoulders, and then she applied herself to his tie. His shoulders were broad, and she wanted to just run her hands over them, but she was too shy. She carefully unbuttoned his shirt, pushing it off his shoulders. As soon as the shirt was on the floor, she pressed a kiss to his bare skin.

She looked down at the fastening of his pants, and couldn't bring herself to take anything else off him. Her eyes met his. "You're on your own from there."

He laughed. "Lose your nerve?"

"Of course not," she countered. "I never planned on taking your pants off."

"My turn again then?" He reached to her waist and unfastened her top petticoat pushing it to the floor, and followed suit with the next.

She stood before him in just a camisole and her knickers. She'd not been quite so unclothed in front of anyone but her sister since they'd moved to Texas. Her first instinct was to cover herself with her hands, but the look in his eyes stopped her. He was pleased with her. It was right there on his face.

"You're beautiful," he whispered, his voice filled with awe.

She smiled, stepping closer to him and wrapping her arms around him. She felt strange just standing there so he could stare at her. "I'm so glad you think so."

"I know so! Your sister doesn't hold a candle to you." He cupped her face in his hands, lowering his mouth to join with hers. He touched her nowhere else, but they stood pressed together from shoulder to hip.

When he finally broke the kiss, he held her eyes as he moved his hands down her sides, and one hand came up to cup her breast in his palm. "You're so soft."

She reached out and touched his shoulder. "You're hard."

"I want to finish undressing you," he said, his voice still soft.

"Do it."

He untied the small bow over her bosom, keeping her camisole closed, and then he released button after button. Opening the camisole, he stared down at what he'd uncovered, one of his thumbs reaching out to flick over her exposed nipple. Never had he imagined a woman would be so soft there.

He pushed the camisole off her shoulders, before taking her hand and leading her to the bed.

Opal sat down, watching him for what he wanted from her. She wanted to be accommodating, but she was so nervous. She wanted this first time to be over with.

"Lie back." He lay on the bed beside her, propped on one elbow. His hand toyed with her nipples, as he leaned over her, pressing his lips to hers. "If I do anything you don't like, tell me," he whispered.

Opal blushed, her hand going to the back of his head to pull him down for another kiss. "The problem is, I seem to like everything," she whispered, just before their lips met.

Nathaniel smiled against her lips, marveling at how different this marriage was from his first.

Much later, Opal turned to Nathaniel in the dark, snuggling closer once again. He held her close, his hands not able to stop touching her. "Thank you," he whispered.

"For what?" she asked, propping herself up on her elbow to look down at his face by the light of the moon shining through the open window.

"For being you. For making today the most wonderful day of my life. For not refusing to have relations with me tonight."

Opal blinked at the last thing. "Why wouldn't I have relations with you? Isn't that a big part of the reason people get married?"

"You'd think." He gathered her back to him, settling her head against his shoulder. "Let me finish my story from earlier."

She put her hand on his chest, her cheek pressed tightly to his shoulder. "All right." She was afraid of what she'd hear, but she knew it was important.

"On my wedding night with Stella, she asked me to give her more time before we consummated the marriage. She said she was too nervous to have relations and wanted to get to know me better first. I had a spare room in my house, so I let her use it with the

understanding that I'd give her a little time, and she'd move into my bed within a short period." He raked his fingers of his free hand through his hair. "So I tried, repeatedly, to get her to share my bed. Finally, about a month after we married, she told me she just didn't find me attractive. I didn't know what to do."

"That's crazy! Who wouldn't find you attractive?" Opal asked.

He laughed. "Thanks for the vote of confidence." It was hard to believe she felt so strongly for him with his history, but she certainly seemed to. "Anyway, I waited another month before deciding I should just get an annulment and be done with it. We hadn't consummated the marriage after all, so it shouldn't have been a problem. When I went to her to talk to her about it, she turned, and I noticed her stomach had changed. I don't know how it had escaped me until then. I asked her about it, and she admitted she was four months pregnant."

"And you stayed with her?" Opal's opinion of him went way up at the story he was telling her. What kind of man stayed with a woman who was carrying another man's child?

"She told me she'd tell everyone the baby was mine, and that I'd abandoned her because I was done with her. That I told her I didn't care any longer because her body was so big." He shook his head. "I was an idiot. But I stayed, with the understanding that she had to move here with me, so she'd be away from the father of the baby."

"And she agreed?"

He nodded. "Yes, the father had been trying to get her to leave for some time, because he didn't want the child to be born and look like him. Anyway, we came here, and she had Florence two months later. I took one look at that baby girl, and I wanted her. I could never deny her." He shook his head. "I expected to resent her, not want her at all. But she was mine from the first moment I saw her."

"She's a sweet girl."

"She is. She also looks exactly like her mother." He sighed. "After Florence was born, Stella was good to her. She was one of the best mothers I've seen. Until Florence was asleep, and then she'd go out. Even here in Nowhere, she had no trouble finding men who would take care of her needs. She even came to me once, not long after Florence was born, but I turned her away."

"Why?"

"I didn't want a woman who would come to me after going to another man. I knew she had at least two cowboys she had relationships with here in Nowhere, plus the man back in Kentucky. I was ashamed to leave the ranch and become a recluse. I didn't really leave until after she died, and I had to start buying food so we could survive."

"How did she die?" Opal couldn't imagine how hard it would have been to have been married to someone like that. He was a good, loving man. How could someone treat him that way?

"She got sick. Dr. Iris said it was cancer. She was only sick for a month or two before she died." He closed his eyes. "It was really hard on Florence, though she seems to be doing much better now." He hoped that Opal would help Florence forget all about Stella.

She shook her head. "I'm sorry you had to go through all that. It doesn't make sense to me that a woman would trick a man into marrying her, just so she wouldn't have a baby alone."

"I was easily tricked. I came back from a long absence, and she was at my home when I arrived. We'd been childhood playmates, because our mothers were best friends. I took one look at her and decided I wanted her for my wife. She was beautiful." He shrugged. "I should have taken more time to get to know her. We were married within two weeks of me returning. Of course, she's the one who suggested we marry, not me."

"I'm surprised you were willing to rush into a marriage after that."

He smiled. "How could I not be with you? I took one look at you, and knew I wanted to spend the rest of my life making love with you every night. The fact that you and Florence got along so well was just a plus."

"Would you have married me if Florence hadn't liked me so much?"

He turned to her more fully on the bed. "I don't know. Would you have still let me do this?" He reached out and grabbed her breast.

She giggled. "Probably."

"Then yes, I definitely would have married you, even if Florence hadn't liked you. But, she has good taste, so of course she likes you." He pulled her to him, kissing her again. "Speaking of which, she'll be home in the morning. We probably shouldn't waste our time chatting when we could be doing something a *lot* more fun!"

"Oh! You want to teach me to play poker?"

He shook his head. "You just think you're funny."

Chapter Nine

Opal was sad when she had to kiss Nathaniel before he left to go work. She would have preferred to spend the day with him, but she knew it was her responsibility to take care of Florence and to spend the day at Dr. Iris's house.

She had the kitchen cleaned up before Florence arrived, and once the little girl was there, they were off to work.

By the time they returned home, she was exhausted. The day hadn't been any busier than any other, but she had slept little the night before, having opted to enjoy her new husband instead of sleeping. Florence had been a big help, and she was thankful for that.

Dr. Iris had come home early, claiming the baby was weighing too heavily on her to get much work done, so Opal had finished her work and left a bit early herself.

"I don't like Dr. Iris," Florence announced as they were washing and peeling potatoes for supper.

"You don't? Why not?" Opal had never heard Florence complain about anyone, so she was surprised by the girl's words.

"She let my mama die, and she should have kept her alive." The little girl kept scrubbing the potatoes she'd been given while she spoke, but anger filled her voice.

"Dr. Iris is my friend, and I know she did everything she could to save your mama. I've seen her with her patients, and she cries every time she can't save someone. It breaks her heart."

"She didn't like Mama."

"What makes you say that? Dr. Iris likes everyone." The conversation seemed very odd to Opal.

Florence shrugged. "She just didn't."

Opal studied the girl for a minute, before she decided to let it go. "Did you have a good time with your new grandma and grandpa?"

Florence smiled. "It was wonderful! I got to play and play. Edna Petunia let me help make cookies, and I got to sit with the big girls and listen to them talk about boys."

"They talked about boys, did they?"

"Oh yes. They talked about which boys at school were the nicest and the smartest. Katie wants to marry the smartest boy at school, but Hattie wants to marry the boy who sits in the corner drawing on his slate when he's supposed to be studying."

"Now, why does Hattie want to marry the boy who draws?" Opal asked, not expecting Florence to have an answer.

"Because he told her she's pretty at recess, and he wouldn't let a

boy throw an apple at her."

"I see. Do you think that's a good enough reason to marry someone?"

Florence shrugged. "I don't know. Neither of them is Prince Charming, so I know they're not for me!"

Opal laughed. "Your papa has you convinced you're marrying a prince, doesn't he?"

"Of course I am." Florence pushed the last of the potatoes she'd been asked to scrub toward Opal. "Do you need my help for anything else? I want to go play with the new doll my grandma bought me."

"Edna Petunia bought you a doll?"

"Oh yes, and Penny made her some clothes. She's the prettiest doll in the world, and I'll keep her forever." Florence rushed off to play, while Opal peeled the potatoes and put them on to boil.

Opal couldn't help but think that for such a difficult start, Florence was doing very well. She wondered what her father was like, and if Nathaniel knew anything about him. Not that she'd ask. She knew it had to be difficult for Nathaniel to tell her everything he had. She wasn't going to press him for even more information about the way his first wife had betrayed him.

She had never in her life hated anyone, but thinking about Stella gave her someone to hate. If the woman were alive, she was certain she'd stab her in the eye with a fork. Well, no she wouldn't but she'd imagine doing it, and that would be almost as nice.

After a long day of work on too little sleep, Nathaniel approached the house, thrilled to be going home to a good wife and his daughter. It was amazing the difference in his life Opal had already made, and they'd known one another for less than a week. It was so much better to look forward to going home and being with his wife and daughter.

For years he'd dreaded going home, never knowing if Stella would be dressed up and ready to go meet with the man of the day, or if she'd be crying all evening. She'd been up and down with her moods as often as she'd changed men she was having affairs with. Every time he looked at Florence, he was happy she hadn't inherited her mother's problems.

He'd had a ranch hand the first three years they'd been in Nowhere, but when he'd come home at the end of a day of work, he'd found his 'sick' ranch hand in bed with his wife. Three-year-old Florence had been left with one of the neighbors for the afternoon.

He'd refused to have anyone work with him after that. He felt

like he couldn't trust anyone. More importantly, he knew he couldn't trust Stella.

He shook his head. Where had those memories come from? He was married to a good woman now. He needed to keep reminding himself of that. Opal would never betray him. It wasn't in her.

He opened the door to his sweet wife putting supper on the table. "I hope you're hungry!" she said with a smile. "I made creamed potatoes with ham."

He grinned, rushing across the room to kiss her. "I missed you today."

"Did you miss me too, Papa?" Florence called from across the room.

"Of course, I did." He turned to Florence and went down on his knees to where she was playing in the corner. She had a doll she was covering up with a blanket. "Who's this?"

"My new grandma gave her to me. And Aunt Penny made her some clothes." Florence held the doll up. "Look, she's wearing a nightgown just like mine!"

"Oh, I like her hair. It's just like yours."

"Orange as carrots," Florence said with a long-suffering sigh.

Nathaniel laughed. "You don't like your hair?"

"I'd rather have blond hair like my new mama's. Hers is very pretty."

"It is pretty, but yours is pretty too. It's just pretty in a different way."

Florence made a face. "I have to wear mine in braids. I want to wear my hair up like Mama does."

Nathaniel looked at Opal, hating his mental image of his daughter with her hair in a bun like Opal's. "Maybe your mama could fix your hair so your braids are up?"

Florence looked at Opal, a longing look on her face. "Could you?"

Opal smiled. "We'll try it tomorrow. For now, it's supper time. Let's eat!"

Florence jumped up, ran across the room to hug Opal, and took her place at the table. "I'm hungry!"

Chapter Ten

When Opal and Florence got to Dr. Iris's house the following morning, they found out they weren't needed. "Dr. Iris is in labor," Tracy Harvey, Iris's sister-in-law, told them. "I'll be staying here for a few days until she's ready to take care of things on her own again."

"Are you sure you don't need me? I can help out at least for today."

Tracy shook her head. "I can handle it. Iris gave me this for you." She handed Opal two dollars. "She said that's what she owed you, and not to worry about coming back. There won't be a problem finding a replacement before she's ready to go back to work."

"Thank you." Opal looked down on the money in her hand. It felt strange to leave without saying goodbye. "Tell her we're praying for her."

Tracy smiled. "That's all she needs."

Opal took Florence's hand and headed back toward town. "We have all day now. We need to do laundry and bake some bread, but we have a little time to go to town. Do you want to go see Aunt Ruby and pick out some fabric for a new dress?"

"Oh yes! I need another dress. I only have one that fits me."

"I know. We'll find something pretty, and I can have it made in just a couple of days." Opal was thrilled to not be working for Dr. Iris any longer. She'd loved the job, but it was time for her to take care of her family now.

They bypassed the house and went to the mercantile, browsing through the yard goods. It took them twenty minutes to settle on a pretty green calico. "It will match your eyes," Opal said with a smile. "And you have the prettiest eyes I ever did see!"

"I do?" Florence's face lit up at the compliment.

Lewis was at the cash register, and they paid him for the fabric. "Ruby around?" Opal asked.

"She's upstairs. Go on up."

"Thanks, Lewis." Opal took Florence's hand, and the two of them climbed the stairs behind the store.

"I didn't know there were stairs here!" Florence said, her voice full of surprise.

Opal laughed. "This is where Ruby and her family live. Do you want to know a secret about my sister, Ruby?"

Florence nodded. "What?"

"She's going to have a baby. And I think it's going to be twins. Two babies. I always wanted us to have twins."

"What's a twin?"

"A twin is when a mama has two babies at the same time. Ruby and I are twins. We have the same birthday." They stepped into the kitchen and saw Ruby kneading bread. "Some twins look exactly alike, but Ruby and I don't."

"You don't even look like sisters!"

Ruby laughed. "Opal is the pretty one."

Florence nodded. "Yes, she is. I bet you wish you had blond hair like Mama." She turned so her back was to Ruby. "See? Mama put my hair up today, so I could look more like her."

Opal winked at Ruby. "Doesn't she look beautiful?"

"Definitely!"

"Oh, you have to see the fabric we picked out to make her a new dress. It matches her eyes perfectly." Opal held up the pretty fabric for her sister to see.

Ruby smiled at Florence. "Oh, that's going to look beautiful on you!"

Florence beamed at the attention. "I could help you pick something that would make you look almost as pretty as Mama if you'd like."

Ruby laughed. "I will take you up on that very soon. For now, do you want to go in the parlor and see the boys' toys?"

"Boys?"

"I have two sons. Their names are Robert and James. They have some wooden trains they left in the parlor when they weren't supposed to. I haven't picked them up yet."

Florence ran off to find the parlor and the wooden trains. As soon as she was gone, Ruby looked at Opal. "How's married life?"

Opal blushed, but smiled. "It's good. Very good."

"Glad to hear it. Nothing to worry about, was there?"

"Nothing at all. I'm married to a good man." Opal thought about everything Nathaniel had told her on their wedding night, and decided to keep a secret from her twin for the first time ever. It wasn't anyone else's business what Nathaniel's first wife had been like.

"I thought that was the case. I'm glad you found someone kind and loving."

"I really did. Dr. Iris is having her baby today, so I won't be working any longer. Her sister-in-law, Tracy, will be helping until she's ready to do things on her own. She said that was plenty of time for them to find a replacement for me."

"Oh good! You need to be concentrating on your new family."

"I know I do. Which means I need to go home and do some laundry and bake bread today. I thought I was going to have to do it all after I got home from work, but I'm happy to say, I have more time

now."

Ruby put the dough into a bowl and covered it with a thin towel. She washed her hands and then hugged her sister. "I'll see you soon. Come visit more often now that you're not working."

"I will!"

Opal got the laundry on the line as soon as she got home, and then she fixed lunch for the three of them. She had just set the bread on the work table to rise when Nathaniel stepped into the house. "What are you two doing home? I thought you were working today."

Opal walked over and greeted him with a kiss. "Dr. Iris is having her baby today, and she doesn't need me any longer. I'm just a housewife and mother now. No job for me."

"I like that," he told her. "I never wanted you working anyway."

"I'm happy not to have to anymore. It will be nice to concentrate on our home."

"Mama got me fabric to make a new dress today!" Florence told him.

He scooped her up into his arms, holding her at eye level. "She did? Do you like the fabric?"

"Oh, yes. It's green and matches my eyes."

"It must be beautiful then!"

Florence giggled. "It is!"

After lunch, he headed back out to mend a broken fence while Opal finished baking. She let Florence help when she wanted to, but for the most part, she let the little girl play. There was plenty of time for her to learn to be a good wife.

Opal was putting supper on the table when there was a knock at the door. She hurried to open it, a tall blond cowboy standing at the door, his hat in his hands.

"May I help you?" she asked. She hadn't seen him around town, but that didn't mean he didn't live there. Most of the cowboys didn't make it to church on Sundays, and that was the primary place she met people.

"Howdy, ma'am. I'm lookin' for work and thought maybe you had some here. I was a ranch hand near Abilene 'til recently, but my ma is sick, and I wanted to be closer to home. I don't need a place to stay, just work."

"I'm sorry, but I don't know if my husband is looking to hire someone or not. He'll be home any minute, though. Why don't you wait out here and talk to him as he comes in?" Opal wouldn't normally be so skittish, but with Nathaniel's history, she wouldn't let

another man into the house while he wasn't there.

"Yes'm."

Opal felt badly for doing it, but she closed the door in his face. After a moment's consideration, she got him a glass of water and took it to him. If she wouldn't let him wait inside, sitting down, it was the least she could do.

She opened the door. "Would you like some water, mister?"

"Yes, thank you!" He took the glass of water from her, a grin on his face. "I 'preciate it, ma'am."

Nathaniel was tired but happy as he walked toward the house at the end of his long day. He had a bounce in his step that he was certain wasn't there for the entire time he'd been married to Stella. It was Opal. She brought out everything good in him. He had thought he loved Stella before they married, but he realized now that it had been a pale imitation of what love truly was.

Opal made him happy to wake up in the morning. Every minute all day while he worked in the fields, he was thinking of her. He wanted to be more and do more, and he wanted it for her. He loved her with every fiber of his being, and he hadn't thought it was possible for him to trust someone enough to feel that way ever again.

He was almost on the house before he noticed the horse tied to a tree. Walking a few feet further, he saw him. A blond cowboy flirting with his wife, laughing as he took a glass of something from her.

Nathaniel closed his eyes, trying to beat down the fury that erupted inside him. They'd only been married forty-eight hours. Surely she wasn't already seeing another man!

He took a deep breath, determined that this time, he was going to fight. He wasn't going to give up the woman he loved, simply because there was another man who wanted her as well.

He walked to where the man stood and looked him in the eye. Opal had gone back into the house. He had no idea why she'd gone, but he was thankful for the opportunity to talk to the man alone.

"I don't know who you are, or what you want, but I want you off my property. I don't ever want to see you talking to my wife again."

The man took a step back, obviously warned by the feral look in Nathaniel's eyes. "Look, mister, I'm looking for work. Nothing else. Your wife didn't even invite me into the house. She brought me a glass of water and told me to wait here to talk to you."

Nathaniel felt shame come over him in waves. "She didn't invite you in?"

"No, sir. She said she didn't know if you were looking for a

ranch hand, and I should talk to you, and she said you'd be home any minute. Then she shut the door in my face."

Nathaniel shook his head. He never should have mistrusted her. "I'm sorry. Tell me about yourself."

Five minutes later, Nathaniel walked into the house, his new ranch hand following behind him. "Opal, this is Gabriel Jensen. He's going to be working with me."

Opal turned to them both, smiling. She rushed over and kissed Nathaniel, not caring that they weren't private. She looked at Gabriel. "It's nice to meet you. Are you staying for supper?"

Nathaniel looked at the younger man, leaving it up to him.

Gabriel shook his head. "No thank you, ma'am. I need to get home." He shook hands with Nathaniel. "Thank you for the work, Mr. Reid. I'll be here right after breakfast." He hurried out the door.

Nathaniel looked at Opal, his eyes filled with all he'd been feeling for her all day. "Did you make him wait outside because you didn't want me to think you were doing something wrong?"

She nodded. "I felt like I was being terribly inhospitable, but I knew it would be best if I didn't invite him in. I don't want to give you any cause to worry."

He pulled her to him, wrapping his arms around her and resting his cheek on top of her head. "I don't know what I've done to deserve you, but I'm so glad God sent you my way. I love you, Opal."

Opal looked up at him, tears filling her eyes. "I love you, too. Thank you for not jumping to conclusions when you saw him."

Nathaniel closed his eyes, refusing to let her believe a lie. "I did jump to conclusions. I'm sorry about that. It won't happen again. You won't spend your life trying to make up for Stella. I promise."

"I don't blame you," she said softly. "Any man would have felt the same way with your history. I will do whatever I can to alleviate your worries, but I do need you to try to have faith in me."

"I do. I promise you. I do."

Epilogue

Opal rushed into town as quickly as she could. She had to see Ruby.

"Mama, slow down! I can't keep up." Florence was running as fast as she could, trying to keep up with her very pregnant step-mother.

Opal laughed, stroking her stomach. "I'm sorry. I'll slow down." She moved at a more sedate pace, knowing she shouldn't be walking as fast as she was in her third trimester anyway.

Ruby was behind the counter at the store. She was due any day. Opal still had two and a half months to go. "Why are you working? Lewis should be taking care of the store while you sit with your feet up!"

Ruby laughed. "Because that's what you'll be doing when it's close to your time?"

Opal shrugged. "Well, I can't, but that's what *you* should do."

"Of course. Because I have no responsibilities."

"I just had my visit with Dr. Iris," Opal said, changing the subject abruptly.

"Oh, is everything all right?" Ruby eyed her twin suspiciously.

"She heard two heartbeats. I told you we'd both have twins!"

Ruby laughed. "Edna Petunia is going to be so excited. I can hear her now. 'If only they were bastard twins...'"

"Well, they're not, but four new grandbabies in the space of three months should cheer her right up." Opal patted her belly. "I tell you what. I'll have boys and you have girls, and then we'll each have some of each."

"Sure. Because we can just choose to make that happen."

"If you pray hard enough. We're both having twins after all!"

Ruby smiled. "We are. No use worrying about it now. We'll know what I'm having within a few days. And you within a few months. Did you ever think we'd both be married and happy when we were forced to move to Texas two years ago?"

Opal shook her head. "No, I really didn't. But I'm so glad it worked out this way."

"Me, too!"

Opal didn't want to think of what her life would be like without her husband and daughter. Or what would have happened if Ruby had moved back to New York as she'd planned. God was certainly looking down on her and smiling. Life was good.

Want more books by Kirsten Osbourne? For a list of all her books, go [here](#).